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THE BIBLE AS GOD'S WORD

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In this essay I desire to show that the Protestant principle of the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, when harmonized with the Protestant doctrine of the responsibility of the individual directly to God and the guidance of the individual by the Holy Spirit, is still a valid principle and in no way prejudiced, but rather confirmed by modern methods of Bible-study. In developing this thesis I shall take up first the theoretical or abstract phases of the subject, and then show how the principles thus laid down are concretely illustrated in the Bible.

I. The Means by Which God's Word Is to Be Recognized

The division of the interests and experiences of human life into sacred and secular is contrary to the highest principles of Christianity. Even to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" is properly to be regarded as included in the rendering "unto God the things that are God's." Religion in its highest form is *all of life*, viewed in certain aspects and particularly that one of its relation to God. Our views of the facts and principles of life, which might be summed up under the term *knowledge*, or more properly, *knowledge and faith*, should no more be divided into the secular and the sacred, the non-religious and the religious, than any other phase of life. In the less developed forms of religion, the gods are concerned with only

a part of life. In the Christian view, God is the source of *all* life, and all truth, whether of history, science, conduct, or faith, is divinely revealed.

How has God revealed his truth to men? No man knows, nor, as mortal, ever will know. In the last analysis none of us knows *how* anyone does anything. Our most complete explanation of any process is only of the circumstances under which it occurs. The energy which causes the occurrence remains inscrutable. If we say that some particular revelation was written on tables of stone or golden plates by the finger of God or revealed to a prophet in a dream we are still only describing circumstances or using figures of speech, which leave the ultimate power and method totally unexplained.

The naïve view still very largely prevails that divine revelations are to be recognized by the unusual manner in which they are received, proclaimed, or authenticated. But this view must be abandoned by the Christian for two conclusive reasons, among others: first, that thus God's relation to life becomes again partial instead of complete—indeed the larger part of knowledge becomes a human attainment and only a very small part is revealed by God; and secondly, a very large and most important part of the truth *recognized* by Christians as divine in authority and source has no such confirmation.

This last fact suggests a principle of

fundamental importance for our discussion, namely, that we can *recognize* God's word or revelation by tests quite independent of the means or manner of its entrance into the realm of human thought. The time and mode in which the material embodied, for example, in the Bible, came into the minds of the authors of its various parts can never be known in any appreciable degree of completeness, and even the names and characters of the authors of many of its parts we shall never know with certainty; but God may yet speak through the parts of doubtful or unknown origin as clearly and unmistakably as he ever spoke through the mouth of prophet or apostle to those gathered about them, or to the seer in his ecstatic vision.

1. *God's word to any man can be recognized through the reason and conscience of that man.*—Protestant Christianity insists that it is the duty of every man to hear and obey the word of God. But if this be true there must be some way by which any given man may recognize God's word when he hears it or sees it written. For the testimony of men as to what is and what is not God's word is, as such, of no reliable character or conclusive value. Men, individually and in groups of all sizes, organized and unorganized, with all varieties of claims to authority, have maintained that certain teachings, written or oral, were the word of God, and other individuals and groups with similar authority and numbers have maintained the contrary. This statement appears at first to contradict the thesis with which this paragraph begins. If every man may recognize God's word, how is it possible that great groups of men, the most learned

and official as well as ignorant and simple, have contradicted each other with regard to what God's word is? Apart from insincerity and intentional deception there are two explanations of such contrary opinions: first, many mistake God's word for one man or group of men for his word to all; secondly, many, although having the *power* to recognize God's word, do not understand the use of this power, and use other false tests for the recognition of God's word instead of the true ones. Let us consider these facts more fully.

So far as God's word ought to be received by any man, it must be because of some practical value for, or relation to, the life of that man. To acknowledge a book, part of which is in Hebrew and the rest in Greek, to be the word of God, cannot have the slightest value for a man who understands only English and has no means of ascertaining the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek. Neither would a treatise on the fourth dimension have any value to the ordinary man, ignorant of mathematics and living only in three dimensions, even if you could convince him that the treatise was written by Gabriel at the command of God. For any given man no word of God is of any importance except that which relates to his needs and duties, and if God be the creator of all life and the source of all wisdom, then, as he has made no two human lives alike, his word to no two human beings would be precisely the same, if that word was to satisfy their needs and make plain their duties. I cannot, then, insist that what God has shown to be my duty is therefore his command to *anyone* else, just because it is his word to *me*.

Secondly, as was noted above, many have held God's word to be recognizable by something *unusual* in the method of its reception or promulgation, and many have used other tests of divine authority such as the prestige, power, or position of the men who proclaimed that some certain doctrine or Scripture was God's word. The compromise principle of the German Reformation, "*Cujus regio, ejus religio*," and the situation of any state-established church illustrate one form of fallacious recognition of God's word. Because the government maintains the truth of a creed or Scripture, its citizens hold it to be God's revelation. Still more familiar forms of such acceptance on human authority are those in which the word of parent, teacher, preacher, priest, or author are accepted without question. In each case the pupil, recognizing the superiority of his instructor, and knowing him, ordinarily, to be a truthful person, accepts his affirmation as final.

Now let us take the matter up positively. We note that every man commonly uses his reason to test the truth of statements made to him or thoughts which come to him from any source. For most affairs of practical importance, his experience gives him facts the examination of which by his reason will approve or disprove the truth of the statement or thought under consideration. If, then, through his reason thoughts are tested and truth recognized, has he not through his reason recognized God's word to him? Surely the most universal characteristic of God's word must be its *truth*, and if God be the source of *all* life, knowledge, and truth, and not merely of that which is more

specifically or technically "religious," it cannot be improper to call any evident truth God's word. Let us accept this principle in this universal form and see later its applications to especially "religious" or sacred writings.

Besides the knowledge of the qualities and relations of things which we call the *truth* about things, and which each man is more or less, but at least in *some degree*, competent to find out and confirm by his reason, there is a very important form of knowledge required by man, namely, that of his duty, or of God's will for him. If God be what the Christian believes him to be, then the essential, universal equality of action-according-to-God's-word would be that it is *morally right*. Without discussing at length the principles of ethics we may say that that action, in any case, must be considered right, which results from the highest motives, and that the conscience or moral judgment is the power in man of valuing motives and recognizing the higher and therefore the right one. It will not require long consideration to see that a righteous God must approve or, what would be equivalent, command any man to do that which he recognized as the best he could do, or that which would follow from the highest motives, and condemn any different sort of action. Whether the direction to do a certain concrete thing in given circumstances is the word of God for any man can be decided only by one who knows whether the act in question would follow from the highest motives in the given situation, and no one could know this more directly than the man himself of whom the action is required.

The reason of any man must confirm

to him the *truth* of thoughts about things and their relations if he is to recognize those thoughts as God's word; and his conscience must affirm the *rightness* of the motive from which any action is done, if he is to recognize the command to do it as God's word. But there is a third form of thought, namely, that about the nature of God and his relations to men, which must be right if his life is to be successful in the fullest sense. God must tell the man the truth about his own nature and will, if man is to enter into proper relations with him. How does man recognize God's word with regard to those things which are unseen, which cannot be reached by the senses?

Religious faith is properly tested by both reason and conscience. Of the many thoughts that come to a man about the unseen powers which determine his fortune, from his parents, his teachers, his books, and his own experience, some will at first appearance seem reasonable and be tentatively accepted and further tested, some will be immediately rejected as unreasonable. Further, some will be such as to encourage right action and helpful social relations, and some will have contrary effects. Consciously or unconsciously those forms of faith which are thus found useful and which are approved for themselves or their effects, by the moral judgment, will be accepted and the others rejected. While for the average individual the traditional belief will be authoritative as such, and will be accepted without question as handed down to him, still the tests of the reasonableness and moral value of faith will be constantly in use, unconsciously in society, and consciously in the experi-

ence of the most enlightened individuals, especially where questions arise as to which of two or more conflicting forms of faith is right, and these are the ways by which God's word as to his own nature and will is to be recognized, however imperfectly they may be understood by the average man.

2. *Each man's understanding of God's word is dependent on his condition and circumstances.*—One may, if he like, find fault with God for having made man as we find him; but, given man as he is, it is quite evident that God will do better for him by speaking to him in language which he can understand, than in less intelligible language. The psychological facts observable in the development of any normal child are illustrated also in more general ways in the development of nations and civilizations. A little boy whom I know recently objected to "saying his prayers" at night. His mother did not compel him, but said that probably his conscience would prick him if he did not pray. A few minutes later he said: "Mother, do pricks of conscience give one the stomach ache?" And shortly after he said his prayers of his own accord. Not many days later his mother had occasion to observe him playing with his younger sister. "Come, Gretchen," he called, "we'll play heaven." The boy climbed upon a desk and Gretchen crawled in under it. "Now," said Hans, "I'm the dear God, and Gretchen is the child, and when she does not pray properly, then I come down and poke her"—that was, of course, giving her "pricks of conscience." The ideas which Hans had of the nature and will of God were doubtless inadequate, and are still, but the wisest

teacher in the world could not give to a five-year-old boy adequate ideas of God. Nevertheless the mother had done her best to teach Hans the truth about God, and without having first very crude and naïve ideas of God he would never get to more complete and accurate thought about him. And what proportion of adult Christians are there, think you, who do not expect some day to see God the Father, in the form of a man, a rather old man, probably, sitting on a great white throne, and Jesus, sitting near by at his right hand, in spite of all teaching about the immanence and omnipresence of God?

It should be clear, then, that God must speak to any given man as well as to any generation or tribe in terms and forms suitable to comprehension under the given conditions and circumstances, and that God's word to one generation will be different from, and superseded by, his word to a later generation which has become fitted to receive higher and more complex truth. When the mother tells Hans that God is like his father, only greater and better, we should hold that to be quite true and the nearest to the absolute truth that Hans can yet understand. Yet when Hans learns later that God has not eyes and ears and a body, like his father, that seems to contradict what he was taught before, and he may be too ready to think: "Now I am learning the real truth. What mother told me before was partly false."

The forms in which God speaks to men of things and their relations, of duty, and of faith, must all be similarly dependent on the conditions of those to whom he speaks, and as a matter of fact we shall find that when men undertake

to write down or to tell others what God has said, they will inevitably mix their own thoughts with God's revelation as well as express God's revelation in the form of their own thoughts, so that in the communication of his word from one man to another, God is not only limited by the human incompleteness and imperfection of the recipient but also by the human qualities of the mediator—the prophet or teacher. So God will not be able to teach men the process of evolution, a thousand years before men have begun to study biology or geology although he know its details perfectly. Nor will he be able to arouse in the thought of men the ideal of "the parliament of man, the federation of the world," many centuries before they have dreamed of the unrighteousness of slavery or the possibilities of such rapid intercommunication as should make a world-parliament practicable. And he will have to use anthropomorphic language in order to tell men of his nature and will, until their power of abstract thought has enabled them to conceive of a personal spirit without a fleshly residence. An extended, concrete, written document, which should be suited to give to men of all degrees and conditions of culture and morality, absolutely correct ideas of things and their relations, of duty in its highest forms, and of the nature and will of God, is simply inconceivable. A document with the perfections indicated could accomplish its purpose only for a potentially omniscient being, one whose ability to comprehend and understand was infinite. The Bible is far better fitted to enable men of all classes to receive the word of God than a document of such imaginary perfections could be.

3. *Thoughts which through extended periods of time have proved by their effects upon life that they were the means of God's revelation to men acquire, thereby, peculiar value and authority as his word.*—We need not stop now to inquire *why* it is, but may be thankful for the fact that, in the long run, men are more likely to accept as their own views about things the opinions of those who have handled them most successfully, to accept as their principles of action the precepts of those whose lives have been most helpful to others, and to accept as their religious faith the confessions of those who have had the deepest spiritual vision. And when men have once accepted views that are true, right, and good, and applied them in their lives, they find them to work out better than inferior views. Thus their truth, rightness, and usefulness are confirmed for themselves and make them in certain ways superior to others who lack them. When these points of superiority are evident to others, they become objects of desire, and thus one tribe or nation will in time accept the wisdom as well as the god of a neighboring tribe if there shall be evidence of superiority in the latter.

No individual makes his faith, moral principles, or knowledge of things fully effective in his life, but larger groups of men, one supplementing the other, will show in their lives the real, logical effects of the thoughts they have accepted as true, right, and good. Thus by the experiments of many with the theories handed down from generation to generation, their value is tested, and their forms, more insensibly and unconsciously in primitive civilization, more expressly and consciously in more ad-

vanced stages, are modified and improved to make them fit the common needs of experience. The tests which are thus constantly being made of traditional thought, by men in organic groups, are the same in nature as those by which, as we have seen above, the individual recognizes the word of God. The tests in the groups are, of course, the sums of the tests of the individuals composing them, but include also certain more social tests which we need not here analyze. The tests are those of the reason and conscience or of that in society which corresponds to these powers in the individual.

When thoughts in fixed forms of narrative, description, song, or prophecy have thus been used and tested for several generations, they come to have great authority, especially if they are specifically connected with religion. In the latter case it invariably happens that the authority of the divine powers comes to be regarded as inhering in all the forms of thought connected with their worship and service. The commands have been given by the god or gods, the songs and prophecies are divinely inspired, etc., and all thus set apart as divine rather than human becomes taboo or holy, not to be tampered with or violated. Explanations of the marvelous manner in which such commands, songs, etc., have been given by the gods to men then easily arise and become part of the sacred tradition. The universal forces of conservatism thus reinforced by the special sanctions of religion give to such compositions—in ages of *writing*, such *literature* or *scriptures*—an authority which easily and very commonly supercedes and often suppresses the original

tests of truth, rightness, and goodness by which the value of the sacred compositions was first recognized. As a result both the important and the unimportant, the essential and the incidental, the permanent and the temporary are preserved together and given equal authority. And indeed when discussion arises there is a tendency to attribute great importance to that the actual value of which has passed away, because such elements will naturally be attacked by the clearer minds, and ardently defended by the upholders of tradition, whereas the more permanent and fundamental principles, whose truth is more evident, will therefore remain undiscussed and neglected. Thus under the title "Word of God," or some corresponding conception, will be preserved the forms of thought which, connected in some way more or less closely, with the worship of the god, have at different times been found socially useful, because of their truth, wisdom, rightness, or value of some other sort, together with less valuable matter, which has been associated with the other, and thus has the same virtue attributed to it.

It need hardly be pointed out that there is a great economy in this process, especially in lower stages of culture. For there are many forces of selfishness, desire, and passion operating upon men, which in their more sensuous and less ethical conditions would be likely to move them much more strongly than the higher considerations of the reason and conscience, and thus the purely intellectual, moral, and religious motives must be supplemented for the undeveloped spirits that they may be controlled for the general good. It is only the

highest sort of character that has the confidence, sensitiveness, and self-control which will enable it to recognize God's word directly, acknowledge and obey it, without the additional pressure of social and religious traditional forms with their external sanctions, rewards, and penalties. Few even of intelligent Christians have fully attained to this freedom.

II. The Bible as the Word of God

The three principles explained above are well illustrated in the origin, position, and use of the Bible. It may be profitable to reconsider them in the same order, with special reference to it.

1. *The Bible will be found to appeal to the reason and conscience of every honest student as presenting to him truth with regard to things, right principles for action, and the best forms of faith, and may thus be recognized as God's word to him.*—By far the larger part of our knowledge about things and their relations comes to us today from extra-biblical sources—science, "profane" literature, and history, etc. It is not, therefore, the less truly God's word or revelation to men. Its truth is to be recognized by our reason. But the details of science and history are consistent with different conceptions of the nature of God and the principles of conduct and thus are separable from more strictly religious thought. There are many passages in the Bible which give us thoughts about history and nature which we may test and find true and therefore accept as God's word. With regard to most if not all of them, however, the higher importance is the religious or ethical teaching, and it is clear that this is not at all dependent on historical or scientific accuracy.

We need hardly go on to say that there is in the Bible both teaching and illustration of the highest moral principles and the best religious faith that the world knows of and that the principles of such conduct and faith are given so clearly that we cannot conceive of them ever being surpassed. It may be more necessary to call attention to the fact that the fundamental reason for the authority which Protestant Christianity has from the beginning given to the Bible is just this fact that its highest ethical and religious principles have been recognized to be true, right, and good by the reason and conscience of all individuals who have judged them fairly, and therefore to be God's word with his authority behind it.

The theological recognition of God's revelation through the reason and conscience is embodied in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He is to teach the disciples all things (John 14:26), he is the Spirit of truth (John 15:26), the spirit which came upon Jesus, and determined his life (John 1:32), the spirit which was incarnated in Jesus (John 1:14) and which lighteth every man coming into the world (John 1:4, 9). Paul refers to the same illumination of God's Spirit in the conscience (Rom. 2:14, 15), and John represents Jesus as constantly appealing to the reason and conscience, as in 6:45; 7:17; 8:46, and 10:25, 32, 37, 38.

We noted in the first part of this essay that we could not be sure of recognizing God's word by unusual occurrences in connection with its reception or propagation. We cannot here go deeply into the subject of miracle, but may refer to a few simple principles for the consideration of those who think that the Bible is

shown to be God's word by the authentication of miracles. First, there is no indication in the Bible that miracles could be worked *only* by good men (cf. Exod. 7:11, 22; Rev. 13:11-15) nor that the power to work miracles carried with it perfection of character or power to speak God's word without error. It is related that the disciples did wonders of healing, etc., and of the same disciples later, that they forsook or denied Jesus. And further, the reputed authors of three of the principal books of the New Testament (Mark, Luke, and Acts) are nowhere said to have worked miracles, and make no special claims in their writings to anything miraculous or unusual in their reception or transmission of the truths of their narratives. Thus for these books whose proper place in the Bible has never been questioned there is no miraculous authentication of any sort.

But a more conclusive argument should come from the nature of the case. If the Christian conception of God be true, then the characteristics of his word must be those which we have above presented: truth of fact, rightness of morals, and the highest qualities of faith. These characteristics are open to the recognition of any man, and as soon as they are recognized, they authenticate God's word for him, wherever or however it be found. As a matter of fact, although other theories have been and still are held by many, as this of the authentication by miracle, in practice it is the argument from the moral and religious value of the Bible that has been the fundamental and prevailing one in Protestantism and that cannot be gainsaid, however one may doubt the truth of the

miracles narrated in the Bible; and in the sermons of all Protestant preachers the practice is so constant as to be almost exclusive, to take a text from the Bible and then in the sermon *show* its truth by its appeal to the reason and conscience, rather than to assume its truth and draw from it conclusions which are opposed to, or unconfirmable by, the reason and conscience. Wherever this practice is seriously departed from, where on the supposed authority of the Bible and *against* the conclusions of reason and conscience, doctrines are taught, we have all kinds of schism, fanaticism, erratic thought, and useless, foolish, or harmful action, as in Mormonism, antinomianism, etc.

2. *The Bible contains a record of God's word to many different persons and groups, in greatly varying conditions and circumstances, and can only be rightly understood with such conditions and circumstances in view.*—The period of composition of the books of the Bible is, roughly, about a thousand years. They were written primarily for the Hebrews or Jews and mostly in the land of Palestine. During this period, from 800 B.C. to 100 A.D., great changes took place in the conditions and culture of the people. Simple pastoral and agricultural life, wars with great nations, captivity, exile, return, Greek and Roman power, and civilization in turn brought new development and experiences to the Jewish people. And no doubt fragments of the Old Testament are much older than the oldest book in its present form, and narratives are given which may be very largely historical, of events occurring centuries before the composition of the records which we have. It should be

very clear that if God spoke to this people as a nation and as individuals during the many centuries covered by this literature, he would have to speak in different ways, and say different things at different times, in order to be understood in the given circumstances. Take, for example, the story of Abraham's proposed sacrifice of Isaac, which has caused much difficulty for those who wished to believe the scriptural account (Gen., chap. 22) and yet could not believe that God would approve, much less command, human sacrifice. We have noted in our study, that that is the command of God which involves action from the highest motives in any given case. We have reason to believe that the idea of human sacrifice would have been familiar to Abraham (supposing him to be a historical character) both from his experience in Chaldea from which he came, and in Canaan where he was living, and that so far from being considered wrong, it would be regarded as more pleasing to the god to whom it was offered than any other. Under those circumstances the thought that God desired him to show his faith by the greatest sacrifice, namely, that of his son and heir, would have been immediately approved by his conscience—that is, by any possible test, it would have been God's word to him. In view of the outcome, and the later development of religious thought in which human sacrifice was forbidden (cf. Deut. 12:31), it is not impossible that one of the purposes of the narration of this story of Abraham was to show how human sacrifice had been abolished by Jehovah, at the outset of the history of his peculiar people. In any case it is entirely conceivable, and in

no way inconsistent with the character of a wise, righteous, and loving God, to think that he might have directed Abraham to make such a sacrifice and forbidden his descendants, five centuries later, with higher ideas of humanity, and of the nature of God, to do the same thing.

The same principle may be applied in the case of the slaughter of men, women, and children in the conquest of Canaan (cf. Deut. 7:1-4; Josh. 6:17, 21, etc.). It is quite conceivable that the highest motives known at the time might have actuated such merciless slaughter, for the sake of the guarding of the morals and religion of the Israelites, and that the result may have been promotive of the real interest and progress of humanity, although at the present time the circumstances are so different that such action could in no way be justified.

We have been considering particularly questions of ethics, and noted that a certain kind of action might be right, and therefore truly commanded by God, at one stage of civilization and culture, and quite the contrary at another. The same principles may be applied to teaching about things and their relations, that is, in the realm of science and history, and in the case of religious teaching. It would be idle to raise the question as to the *exact* truth of the Genesis accounts of creation, for example. In order to understand the truth which has been discovered (or *revealed*—the terms are not contrary but complementary, one denoting the process from the standpoint of man's activity and the other from the standpoint of God's action) with regard to the attainment of its present form by the

earth and its life, it is necessary for a man today to have not only a mature mind but a considerable amount of learning. And as yet we can say nothing about the *exact* truth of the process of creation, although we know a great deal more about it than was known three thousand years ago. The question is whether the Genesis stories were fitted to convey such measure of truth as could at that time be grasped and confirmed, and more particularly, as their essential content is religious rather than scientific, whether the *faith* they presented or involved was at that time the *highest* faith with regard to God and his relations to men. If these questions can be answered affirmatively, and modern scholarship tends most strongly to give to them affirmative answers, then we have sufficient reason for saying that the Genesis stories were the word of God to those for whom they were written, and in the measure in which we can reconstruct the conditions of those times and separate the truth from the form in which it was then necessarily conveyed, we can say it is God's word to us also. Moreover, in many cases we may find the biblical phraseology still better fitted to give to children and undeveloped minds the truths in question than language which would convey a fuller measure of truth to the educated mind of a student, at the *present* time, and thus God's word is contained in both the biblical and the scientific forms, in each in the measure in which the truth is brought to the learner in question.

3. *As the Bible has, through many centuries and in great variety of circumstances, had such effects upon individuals and upon society as are properly attributable to the*

word of God, such effects as no other collection of writings has ever had, and, partly as a result, partly as a cause of these beneficent influences, has been regarded as the Word of God, it has come to have peculiar and exceedingly great and useful authority as the Word of God.—Probably almost every book of the Bible has had a history like this: First, it was written by someone to whom the thought it contains seemed true, right, or good, in some cases as in the works of the prophets, with a clear sense that the thoughts came from God, in others without such distinct feeling. The composition was copied and read, recited, or heard by others, and by some of them recognized as true, right, or good. It was found suitable for special purposes or occasions and came to be used regularly in temple or synagogue, church or home on such occasions, obtaining the sanction of authorities or officials and the prestige of such constant use. Numbers of these books were gathered together for such liturgical or other uses, one collection being used in one place and another in another, with some of the same compositions. As these Scriptures were used in connection with public worship of God, and many of them explicitly claimed to tell of God or declare his word or will, and as they were approved by the consciences and reason of those who heard and studied them, they came to have a special sanctity attached to them as the peculiar property or revelation of God, differing in some ways from all merely human writings, and theories of inspiration were put forth, to account for their origin. Various collections of such writings were in time brought together and compared

by either scholars or officials, and those writings which were most common to all were regarded as standard or “canonical,” those occurring less frequently were discussed and, by tests corresponding to the thought or need of the time and situation, accepted or rejected as belonging to the *sacred* Scriptures or the *Word of God* in the special and exclusive sense. In substantially this way the standard list or canon of the Old Testament, and later of the New, was made.

Similar processes have taken place in connection with the writings belonging to other forms of religion than Christianity. We should betray only our ignorance and prejudice should we deny that they also contain revelations from God. We have, however, in the history and social and moral conditions of the various peoples of the earth a most significant index of the degree in which God's word has been understood and embodied in these writings and the stage of civilization and development in which such Scriptures are God's word to the living generation. That the nations in which Protestant Christianity is the largely prevailing form of religion are, in general, those showing the fullest development of culture, social welfare, and individual character cannot be a mere coincidence—and Protestant Christianity has recognized and used the Bible both theoretically and practically as the highest written expression of the word of God, as no other form of Christianity has done.

It has been the universal history of the development of knowledge and science, that progress has been from rude and crude forms and theories to ever more refined, analytic, and accurate thought

and formula. The earlier theories were, in general, the best statement of the actual phenomena perceived, their relations and significance, that the knowledge and language of the time would permit. In comparison with later, more accurate formulations we are liable, mistakenly, to call the earlier false. Fortunately practice runs in advance of theory, especially in the earlier development of thought, and thus the theory is modified and corrected in view of experience. Theories as to the nature of the revelation made by God in the Bible have followed this rule. It has been maintained that God gave to certain men not only thoughts about truth, righteousness, and faith, but the exact words in which to express those thoughts, in such a supernatural, non-human way that the writings of these men were more truly the writing of God, the human authors having rather the function of pen or typewriter than of secretary or pupil even. The result then was a sum of compositions which, being from God himself, was perfectly true in its statements, right in its commands, and complete in the religious teaching set forth, for all men, everywhere, and for all time. The Scriptures thus given by God and miraculously authenticated could, from the nature of the case, not be amenable to any tests of reason or conscience, of individual or organization, for a test which *begins* by excluding the possibility of rejection or adverse criticism or modification to suit circumstances is no test at all, and it was maintained that as God's knowledge is perfect it must be assumed that in case of any disagreement of human reason or judgment with "God's Word" in the Bible, there could

be no choice but to accept the latter, and distrust the former. This theory of biblical inspiration, although it may at first seem like a refined and highly developed theory, is in reality but a rough and crude one, natural, even inevitable before men had thought with sufficient clearness and care on the subject, but involving absurdities and contradictions as we have seen in the first part of this article. It is all directly and naturally deducible by the naïve mind from a few very simple propositions such as, "The Bible is the word of God"; "God is perfect and superior to man in every respect"; "What God says or does must partake of the perfection of his nature."

But practice has never perfectly conformed to this theory, and the more wise and intelligent the theologian, the more inconsistent has his use of the Bible been with this theory. For just as in fact the books of the Bible were separated from other books on account of the superiority of their appeal to the reason and conscience, so in the case of those men and groups which received the most value from, or made the best use of, the Bible, the parts of greater or more permanent value were found and emphasized by the reason and conscience, and the other parts were neglected, explained away, or interpreted in the light of those whose truth or value had been approved by the reason and conscience. Thus the Bible as actually used in Christendom today is one embossed, so to speak, by the experience and wisdom of centuries of study and use, so as to throw certain parts into bold relief, and to make of others merely a filling-in or background. The actual use made by *any* man of the

Bible is the farthest possible from a naïve acceptance of every word as equally true, important, and authoritative, but is modified by the influences of home, school, church, and Sunday school, political and social conditions of every sort. While the old formula has been continually repeated—"This is the word of God, and therefore you must believe and obey it"—the most frequent and highest uses have ever been: "This is *true* and therefore you must accept it; this is *right* and therefore you must do it; this is *good* and therefore you must believe it." And as the Bible contains so much that can constantly be used in this way, it is thus constantly approving itself to the minds and hearts of men as the word of God.¹

Summary

If the preceding discussion has been understood it will have become evident that the Bible is the word of God in the narrower and stricter sense, that is, having the authority of God for any given individual, to just the extent that it brings to him what he can recognize as true, right, and good. Until it has thus approved itself to the individual, it may be for him, as it is for millions of people, the Word of God in a sense which is more vague and indefinite and yet very important. The real value of this general reputation or position of the Bible is this, that attention is called to a most remarkable collection of writings which contain the highest principles of faith and practice, in such form that they are accessible to the common man as well as to the scholar, and tend to develop the

highest forms of individual and social life where they are rightly used. Their value has been tested and proved by many centuries of use in the greatest variety of circumstances. They are thus fitted to bring to men knowledge of God's truth in a peculiar and unique way. The common, lay view is of course different from this, as we have seen, being more nearly that cruder view, the development of which we have traced. But as it serves to bring the practical value above noted to masses of people who are not at first fitted to understand the real significance and source of that value, it is a very useful conception. It carries with it, however, certain serious dangers of misuse, which we cannot here consider.

It being clear that the Bible is truly the word of God, because, and in the measure in which it brings to any man that which he may recognize as true, right, and good, it should be equally clear that all the labor of scholars directed to the study of the time and circumstances of the origin, and the original meaning and message of the Scriptures, for the sake of bringing out clearly the truth, moral principles, and religious teaching of the Bible, is to be most heartily approved and welcomed. All such work well done will make it easier for a man to receive God's word to him today, and only as the Spirit of Truth makes plain to the reason and moral judgment of an individual some truth or good which is in a thought, however and from whatever source it may come, can there be for him any word of God in the highest sense.

¹ For a fuller discussion of the ways in which the Bible meets the particular needs of men, and of the proper use of the Bible, see Cook, *Christian Faith for Men of Today*, chaps. ii and iii (The University of Chicago Press, 1913).